

Insight by the Nature Method

by

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Now we shall see how concentration can come about, naturally on the one hand, and as a result of systematic practice on the other. The end result is identical in the two cases: the mind is concentrated and fit to be used for carrying out close introspection. One thing must be noticed, however. The intensity of concentration that comes about naturally is usually sufficient and appropriate for introspection and insight, whereas the concentration resulting from systematic training is usually excessive, more than can be made use of. Furthermore, misguided satisfaction with that highly developed concentration may result. While the mind is fully concentrated it is likely to experience such a satisfying kind of bliss and well-being that the mediator may become attached to it or imagine it to be the fruit of the path. Naturally occurring concentration which is sufficient and suitable for use in introspection is harmless, having none of the disadvantages inherent in concentration developed by means of intensive training.

In the Tipitaka there are numerous references to people attaining naturally all stages of path and fruit.* This generally came about in the presence of the Buddha himself but also happened later with other teachers. These people did not go into the forest and sit, assiduously practising concentration on certain objects in the way described in later manuals. No systematic effort was involved when arahantship was attained by the first five disciples of the Buddha on hearing the Discourse on Non-selfhood, or by the one thousand hermits on hearing the Fire Sermon. In these cases keen, penetrating insight came about quite naturally. These examples clearly show that natural concentration is liable to develop of its own accord while one is attempting to understand clearly some question; and that the resulting insight, as long as it is firmly established, is sure to be quite intense and stable. It happens naturally, automatically, in just the same way that the mind becomes concentrated the moment we set about doing arithmetic. The same happens when firing a gun. When we take aim the mind automatically becomes concentrated and steady.

Normally we completely overlook this naturally occurring concentration because it does not appear the least bit magical, miraculous, or awe-inspiring. But through the power of just such concentration, most of us could actually attain liberation. We could attain the path, the fruit, nirvana, and arahantship, just by means of natural concentration. It is something most of us either already have or can readily develop. We ought to do everything we can to cultivate it, to make it function perfectly and yield the appropriate results. That is just what most of those people did who succeeded in attaining enlightenment without knowing anything of modern concentration techniques.

Now let us look at the nature of the stages of inner awareness leading to full insight into the world, that is, into the five aggregates (*khandhas*). The first stage is joy (*pīti*), mental happiness, or spiritual well-being. Doing good in some way, even giving alms, considered the most basic form of merit-making, can be a source of joy. Higher up, at the level of morality, completely blameless conduct by way of word and deed brings an increase of joy. We also discover that joy of a definite kind is associated with the lower stages of concentration.

This joy or rapture has in itself the power to induce tranquillity. Normally the mind is quite unrestrained, continually falling slave to all sort of thoughts and feelings associated with enticing things outside. It is normally restless, not calm. But as spiritual joy becomes established, calm and steadiness are bound to increase in proportion. When steadiness has been perfected, the result is full concentration. The mind becomes tranquil, steady, flexible, manageable, and at ease. It is then ready to be used for any chosen purpose, in particular for the elimination of the defilements.

It is not a case of the mind's being rendered silent, hard, and rocklike. Nothing like that happens at all. The body feels normal, but the mind is especially calm and suitable for use in reflection and introspection. It is perfectly clear, cool, still, and restrained. This is quite unlike sitting in deep concentration. A deeply concentrated mind is in no position to investigate anything. It cannot practise introspection at all; it is in a state of unawareness and is of no use for insight. *Deep concentration is a major obstacle to insight practice.* To practise introspection one must first return to the shallower levels of concentration; then one can make use of the power the mind has acquired. Insight so developed is natural insight, the same sort as was gained by some individuals while sitting listening to the Buddha expounding the Dharma. It is conducive to reflection and introspection of the right kind, the kind that brings understanding, and it involves neither ceremonial procedures nor miracles.

This does not mean, however, that insight will arise instantaneously. One cannot be an *arahant* straight off. The

first stage in insight may come about at any time, depending once again on the intensity of the concentration. It may happen that what arises is not true insight because one has been practising incorrectly or is enveloped in too many false views. If insight develops in only small measure, it may convert a person into an *ariya* at the lowest stage. Or, if it is not sufficient to do that, it will at least make him or her a high-minded individual, an ordinary person of good qualities. If conditions are right and good qualities have been properly and adequately established, it is possible to become an *arahant*, a fully enlightened being.

The expression "insight into the true nature of things" refers to realizing transience (*anicca*), unsatisfactoriness or suffering (*dukkha*), and non-selfhood (*anatta*). It means seeing that nothing is worth getting, that no object whatsoever should be grasped at and clung to as being a self or as belonging to a self, as being good or bad, attractive or repulsive. Liking or disliking anything, even an idea or a memory, is clinging. To say that nothing is worth getting or being is the same as saying that nothing is worth clinging to. "Getting" refers to setting one's heart on properly, position, wealth, or any attractive object. "Being" refers to the awareness of one's status as husband, wife, rich man, poor man, winner, loser, or even the awareness of being oneself. If one can completely give up clinging to the idea of being oneself, then being oneself will no longer be subject to suffering.

If we were to give up trying to get or to be anything, how could we continue to exist? The words "getting" or "being" as used here refer to getting and being based on mental defilements, craving, the idea of "worth getting," "worth being," so that the mind does get and be in real earnest. These factors lead to depression, anxiety, and distress, or at least to a heavy burden on the mind from beginning to end. Knowing this truth, we shall be constantly on the alert, keeping watch over the mind to see that it does not fall slave to getting and being through the influence of grasping and clinging.

The world and all things have the property of impermanence, of worthlessness, and of not belonging to anyone.

A skeptic may ask: "If nothing at all is worth getting or being, does it follow that nobody ought to do any work or build up wealth, position, and property?" Anyone who comprehends this subject can see that a person equipped with right knowledge and understanding is actually in a far better position to carry out any task than one subject to strong desires and lacking in understanding. Very briefly, in becoming involved in things, we must do so mindfully, and our actions must not be motivated by craving.

The Buddha and all the other *arahants* were completely free of desire; yet they succeeded in doing many things far more useful than what any of us are capable of. If we look at accounts of how the Buddha spent his day, we find that he slept for only four hours and spent the rest of the time working. We spend more than four hours a day just amusing ourselves. If the defilements responsible for the desire to be and get things had been completely eliminated, what was the force that motivated the Buddha and all *arahants* to act? They were motivated by discrimination coupled with loving-kindness (*metta*). Even actions based on natural bodily wants, such as receiving and eating alms food, were motivated by discrimination. They were free of defilements, free of all desire to keep on living in order to be this or to get that. They had the ability to discriminate between what was worthwhile and what was not; this was the motivating force in all they did. If they found food, well and good. If not, it made no difference. When they were suffering with fever, they knew how to treat it and did so as well as possible on the basis of this knowledge. If the fever was quite overpowering, they recalled that to die is natural. Whether they lived or died was of no significance to them. The two were of equal value in their eyes.

If one is to be completely free of suffering, this is the best attitude to have. There is no need for a self as master of the body. Discrimination alone enables the body to carry on by its natural power. The example of the Buddha shows that the power of pure discrimination and pure goodwill alone is sufficient to keep an *arahant* living in the world and, what is more, doing far more good to others than people who are still subject to craving. People with defilements are likely to do only what benefits themselves, since they act out of selfishness. By contrast, the deeds of enlightened beings are entirely self-less and so are perfectly pure.

To come to know the true nature of things is the objective of every Buddhist. It is the means by which we can liberate ourselves. Regardless of whether we are hoping for worldly benefits, wealth, position, and fame; or for benefits in the next world such as heaven; or for supramundane benefit, the path, the fruit, and nirvana; whatever we are hoping for, the only way to achieve it is by means of right knowledge and insight. In the texts it is said that we become purified through insight and not by any other means. Our path to freedom lies in gaining the insight, the clear vision, which sees that in all things there neither is nor has ever been anything at all worth grasping at or clinging to, worth getting or being, worth risking life and limb for. We *have* things and we *are* things only in terms of worldly, relative truth.

In worldly language we say we are this or that, just because in any society it is expedient to recognize by names and occupations. But we must not believe that we really are this or that, as is assumed at the level of relative truth. To do so is to behave like crickets, which, when their faces become covered with dirt, become disoriented and muddled and proceed to bite one another until they die. We humans, when our faces become covered in dirt, when we are subject to all sorts of delusions, become so bewildered and disoriented that we do things no human being would ever do under ordinary circumstances -- killing, for instance. So let us not go blindly clinging to relative truths; rather, let us be aware that they are just relative truths, essential for society but nothing more. We have to be aware of what this body-and-mind really is, what its true nature is. In particular we have to be aware of its impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and non-selfhood, and make sure we always remain independent of it.

As for the wealth and position that we cannot do without, let us regard these too as relative truths, so that we can break free from the existing custom of saying, "This belongs to So-and-so" or "That belongs to Such-and-such." The law watches over ownership rights for us; there is no need for us to cling to the idea of "mine." We ought to possess things purely and simply for the sake of convenience and ease, not so they can be master over our minds.

When we have really come to perceive clearly that nothing is worth getting or being, disenchantment (*nibbida*) develops in proportion to the intensity of the insight. This is a sign that the clinging has become less firm and is starting to give way. It is a sign that we have been slaves for so long that the idea of trying to escape has at last occurred to us. This is the onset of disenchantment and disillusionment, when one becomes fed up with one's own stupidity in grasping and clinging to things, believing things to be worth having and being. As soon as disenchantment has set in, there is bound to come about a natural, automatic process of disentanglement (*viraga*), as if a rope with which one had been tightly bound were being untied, or a rinsing out, as when the dye that had been firmly fixed in a piece of cloth is removed by soaking it in the appropriate substances. This process, whereby clinging gives way to a breaking free or a dissolving out from the world or from the objects of that clinging, was called by the Buddha emancipation (*vimutti*). This stage is most important. Though not the final stage, it is an essential step toward complete liberation. When one has broken free to this extent, complete liberation from suffering is assured.

Once broken free from slavery, one need never again be a slave to the world. One becomes pure and uncontaminated where previously one was defiled in every way. To be enslaved to things is to be defiled in body, speech, and mind. To break free from slavery to the delightful tastes of the world is to achieve a condition of purity and never be defiled again. This purity (*visuddhi*), once it has been attained, will give rise to a genuine calm and coolness free from all turbulence, strife, and torment. This state of freedom from oppression and turbulence was called by the Buddha simply Peace (*santi*), that is, stillness, coolness in all situations. It is virtually the same thing as nirvana.

The word "nirvana" (*nibbana*) has been translated as "absence of any instrument of torture." Taken another way, it means "extinction without remainder." So the word "nirvana" has two very important meanings: first, absence of any source of torment and burning, freedom from all forms of bondage and constraint; and second, extinction, with no fuel for the further arising of suffering. The combination of these meanings indicates a condition of complete freedom from suffering. The word "nirvana" also has several other useful meanings. It can be taken to mean the extinction of suffering, or the complete elimination of defilements, or the state of coolness, or the condition that is the cessation of all suffering, all defilements and all karmic activity. The word "nirvana" is used by various sects, but often in quite different senses. For instance, one group takes it to mean simply calm and coolness, because they identify nirvana with deep concentration. Other groups even consider nirvana to be total absorption in sensuality.

The Buddha defined nirvana as simply that condition of freedom from bondage, torment, and suffering which results from seeing the true nature of the worldly condition of all things, and so being able to give up clinging to them. It is essential, then, that we recognize the great value of insight into the true nature of things, and that we endeavour to cultivate this insight by one means or another. Using one method we simply encourage it to come about of its own accord, naturally, by developing, day and night, the joy that results from mental purity, until the qualities we have described gradually evolve. The other method consists in developing mental power by following an organized system of concentration and insight practice. This latter technique is appropriate for people with a certain kind of disposition who may make rapid progress with it if conditions are right. But we can practise the development of insight by the nature method in all circumstances and at all times. We do it just by making our own way of daily living so pure and honest that there arise in succession spiritual joy, calm, insight into the true nature of things, disenchantment, disentanglement, escape, purification from defilements, and finally peace, nirvana.

Footnote:

[*] The way of practice (*magga*) and the fruit of that practice (*phala*), as developed by each of the four *ariyas* or "noble ones": stream-enterer, once-returner, non-returner, and fully liberated being (*sotapanna*, *sokadagamin*, *anagamin*, *arahant*). [[Back to text](#)]

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